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COVER: Lucifer the 'Light-Bearer'

We all *know* what light is; but it is not easy to *tell* what it is.

Samuel Johnson

Editor: Radha Burnier

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DIGAVALLI VENKATASIVA RAO

Swami T. Subba Row

TALLAPRAGADA Subba Row, *vakeel* or attorney of the High Court of Judicature at Madras, who died in 1890 at the early age of 34, was the son of T. Veeravenkatanarayana, an official of Dommeru village near Kovvur in the West Godavari District. He was born on 6.7.1856 at Kakinada, East Godavari, in the house of his maternal grandfather Digavalli Timmaraju, a retired Court official of the Rajamundry District. He was a precocious child and showed early signs of a prodigious memory and intelligence. His father died in 1857 and he was brought up by his maternal uncle, Digavalli Venkatasiva Rao, who became the Dewan of Pittapur Raja Gangadhara Rama Rao.

His maternal uncle performed his *aksharabhyaṣam* (ceremony when a boy begins his formal education) in his fifth year and his *upanayanam* (when he was invested with the sacred thread) in his seventh year. His marriage was also performed early but the child-wife died of cholera in 1866. In December 1869, he and his mother accompanied his uncle and aunt on their pilgrimage to Banaras. Later, he was to tell his younger uncle that the city appeared very familiar to him as if he had lived there at one time. Some learned people declared that he must indeed have lived there in his previous birth. While the pilgrims were busy having their holy bath in the Ganges and worshipping Lord Viswanatha and the goddess Annapoorna and other deities, the boy Subba Row disappeared for a number of hours. When questioned, he said that he had met a *digambara* (naked) *yogi* in a lonely garden and was initiated into Brahma Vidya. From this time onwards he performed his *sandhya*, (prescribed daily prayers), *japam* (recitation of a *mantra*) and meditation regularly.

After he returned from the pilgrimage, he was admitted into the seventh class in the Hindu School at Kakinada. The principal of the school was very much impressed by his brilliance and gave him a double promotion; he passed his matriculation examination with honours in 1871, and in December 1872 he joined Presidency College, Madras.

Subba Row was a diligent student and was popular with his teachers for his intelligence and brilliance. In 1874 he was awarded the Lord Elphinstone Scholarship of Rs. 16 per month tenable for three years. In January 1875, when he was in the junior B.A. class he was

Mr Digavalli Venkatasiva Rao is a member of the Indian Section.

awarded the Boudillon Prize for his Telugu essay. The following year when he was in the senior B.A. class he was awarded the Elphinstone Prize of Rs. 80 for English essay-writing and the Vizianagaram Maharaja's Prize of Rs.16 for psychology.

He came first in the B.A. degree examination of 1876. He then joined the law classes and obtained his B.L. degree standing fourth in rank.

In 1876 Subba Row married Sundaramma, daughter of his younger maternal uncle. Two years later he was appointed Registrar of the High Court of Baroda at a salary of Rs. 700 per month. The climate (and the water) of Baroda did not suit him and he resigned the job early in 1880 and returned to Madras where he enrolled himself as a High Court advocate. He practised for ten years, appearing in important cases and was held in great respect both by the Bench and by the Bar. Sir P. Sivasamy Iyer, one of his contemporaries, spoke very highly of his intellectual powers as a lawyer and declared that he would have risen to the top rank in his profession if he had not devoted himself to the Theosophical Society.

Subba Row took an active part in public life even as a student. An association of young men of Madras, including college students, was established in 1875 under the name of the Triplicane Literary Society. Its first President was Panappakam Anantha-charyulu who was a prominent advocate at the High Court and afterwards became a member of the Imperial Legislative Council and President of the Indian National Congress. Other members of the Society and close friends of Subba Row were G. Subramanya Iyer, M. Veera-raghavachari, D. Kesava Rao and Nyapathi Subba Rao Panthulu who distinguished themselves in the public life of the Madras Presidency and established *The Hindu* in 1878. It is significant that some of the members of this Society founded the Madras Mahajana Sabha, the precursor of the Indian National Congress, in 1883. Subba Row became a member of the Society even while still a student and took a prominent part in its discussions. He also contributed many articles to *The Hindu*.

Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott who had established the Theosophical Society in America in 1875, published a widely circulated magazine which contained articles about occultism and the various religions and philosophies of the world. Subba Row corresponded with the two leaders and contributed some valuable articles to their magazine on Hindu religion and philosophy. Indeed, a letter of Subba Row's dated November 1879 shows that he was in close contact with the Theosophical leaders at that time. Madame Blavatsky respected him for his learning and scholarship in Sanskrit and the Vedanta. Sir Subra-manya Iyer, Acting Chief Justice of Madras High Court, gives an account of his attainments in the study of religion and philosophy in his introduction to the second edition of Subba Row's *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita* published by The Theosophical Society.

It was at Subba Row's invitation that Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott came to Madras in April 1882. In his book, *Old Diary Leaves*, Olcott describes the events that preceded the establishment of the Society at Madras

and writes that they chose Adyar as their Headquarters mainly because of the presence of Subba Row at Madras.

The H.P.B. Centenary volume of THE THEOSOPHIST says: 'Swami T. Subba Row was the only one among the H.P.B. circle whom she considered her equal in occult knowledge. In the first announcement of *The Secret Doctrine* on the title page of the work after her name as author, she printed the words "Assisted by T. Subba Row Garu, B.A., B.L., F.T.S:, Councillor of the Theosophical Society and the Secretary of its Madras Branch". *The Mahatma Letters* also mentions Subba Row.

The esoteric writings of T. Subba Row published by The Theosophical Society, Adyar, has run into three editions. His biography by Digavalli Venkatasiva Rao was published as a serial in *Krishna Patrika* of Masulipatnam in 1959. □

Let us each take the solution that best suits our mental and spiritual constitution, and let us leave our neighbours an equal freedom of choice; let us never hesitate to state and defend our own views and oppose those other views that we think wrong, but let us do all this as we would defend our own and oppose our opponent's game at chess, with no more feeling against our opponents than we have against an adversary at the noble game.

Esoteric Writings, T. Subba Row